

THE JOURNAL OF THE
ROYAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

1891

Volume 21
Part 1
London
1891

W. H. Jones

MIKHAIL BUBENNOV

The
WHITE BIRCH

A Novel



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

M o s c o w 1 9 4 9

**TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY LEONARD STOKLITSKY**

**DESIGNED
BY A. RADISHCHEV**

**ILLUSTRATIONS
BY M. KARPENKO**

*Out in the field the birch tree stood
Combing her curls in the field she stood....*

* * *

*Wounded by an axe-blade, silver birch is weeping
Down her silver birch bark, silver tears are creeping.
Don't you cry my birch tree; honey, do not sorrow,
This will not be fatal; it will heal tomorrow.*

AL. K. TOLSTOY

THE ... OF ...

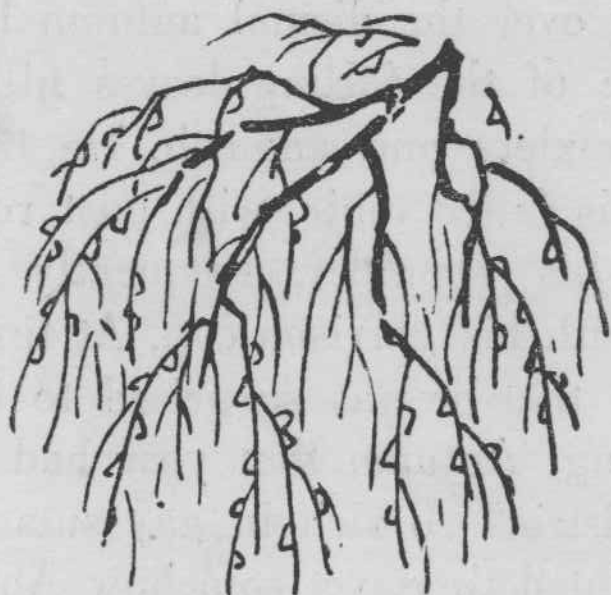
...

... of ...
... and ...
... and ...
... and ...

...

PART ONE

PART ONE



I

The leaves came rustling down. Sadly, submissively, the forests were shedding their scarlet foliage. The leaves showered down almost incessantly, even when there was no wind. A melancholy rustle held sway in the sylvan fastnesses, drowning out every other sound. All the forest creatures had shrunk into hiding until better times; all but the magpies, who chattered shrilly and lightheartedly on their swaying perches in the naked treetops.

Autumn had lavishly strewn the roads and forest clearings with fallen leaves. Gusts of wind lifted clouds of dead leaves into the lofty reaches

of the air, swirled them about and then carried them east; at such times a scarlet storm seemed to be raging over the dismal autumn land.

The rustle of the falling leaves filled Andrei's heart with anxiety and anguish. He trailed along wearily in his faded tunic, with coat roll and rifle slung over his shoulder, frequently wiping his dusty face with his garrison cap. At times his legs felt so shaky that he was surprised to find himself still marching. Autumn that year had burst upon his native district, so rich in gay summer colours, at the appointed time, yet somehow Andrei regarded its advent as particularly sudden and bold. He could not bear to see the cruel force of autumn triumphing everywhere—in the sparkling, gilded woods, in the bare, empty fields.

At noon Andrei halted on the crest of a hill, straightened up to his full height over the withered grass and with an effort surveyed the country around. Crowds of soldiers were plodding dejectedly through the hollows. The roads were filled with columns of trucks and carts rumbling along in a thick screen of dust. In the autumn sky German planes were droning eastward, their greyish-yellow wings glistening in the sun; they swooped down on the roads, screaming, and the earth shuddered heavily, and ragged black plumes of smoke soared up. For some reason Andrei felt that his battalion had lost its way in the midst of that wind

and groaning and rumbling. Wiping his face with his cap, he shouted:

"Say, are we going right?"

The squad leader, Sergeant Matvei Yurgin, a tall, swarthy, reserved Siberian, understood what Andrei meant, but he answered bitterly:

"We're not going the way we should, but what can we do about it?"

"Where to now? This way?"

"Follow me!"

They were withdrawing along small country roads and at times across roadless tracts, straying in the dark and swampy woodland of the Rzhev area. Here, however, other units had already passed. At times they came upon scattered army equipment: rifles, grenades, knapsacks, gas masks, helmets.... On a sudden impulse Andrei quickly gathered up sundry articles. Matvei Yurgin halted when he noticed Andrei's burden.

"What are you carrying that for?" he asked in surprise.

Andrei dumped his collection of battered equipment and weapons on the ground. He stared at it, wondering what had made him carry all that weight, and said reproachfully:

"Look—they're throwing it away!"

Matvei Yurgin caught him by the arm.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked anxiously.

Andrei did not answer the question. "See what an autumn it is?" he whispered. "There's never been one like it here."

"It's a noisy autumn. . . ."

"A frightening autumn," Andrei rejoined in a whisper.

"You're ill," Yurgin declared with conviction.

Just off the road, on the slope of a little rise, stood a lone birch sapling with a tender, satiny white bark. The young birch was shaking its branches with childish glee, as if bidding a rapturous greeting to the sun; and the wind, playing with the tree, was gaily counting the tinkling ducat gold of its foliage. A faint luminescence, as from some magic lamp, seemed to be glowing from the leaves. There was something vivacious, even pert, about the lone tree, and the soldiers called out to it fondly as they passed:

"Hey, you pretty thing, come along with us!"

The birch caught Andrei's eye, and when he noticed the vitality surging in it from base to crown he felt that nature herself had granted it the right to stand in that field through the ages. Abruptly he turned off the road. He walked up to the birch. Its marvelous glow refreshed his face—and all of a sudden he felt something bursting in his chest. . . .

Andrei had loved birches since childhood. He loved to watch them in the spring when they awakened and began to grope in the air with their

naked branches; he loved to inhale the odour of their dew-drenched leaves at dawn; he loved to watch their rustling dance in a ring around glades, to watch them reach out their heavily-frosted arms toward windows and rock red-breasted bullfinches on their boughs....

Matvei Yurgin called to Andrei from the road. Andrei neither turned nor answered; he was hurriedly unshouldering his coat roll. Yurgin strode back to him and asked in a strange, hoarse voice, his eyes narrowing:

"What's the matter, trying to fall behind?"

Andrei gave the sergeant a strange look.

"How long will this go on?" he said, leaning forward. "How long?"

Yurgin had never seen him in such a state. Andrei was a quiet, easygoing soldier; a steady vernal light always shone in his bright, crystal-clear eyes. What had come over him? A dark, dry flush burned in his handsome, thoughtful face, there was mute anguish in his tear-filled eyes, and his sun-cracked lips were trembling.

"How far?" he whispered vehemently.

Now Yurgin understood. "Come, come," he said in a softer voice. "We've got commanders for that. They know. When they give the order we'll make a stand. What's the matter?"

Andrei had suddenly dropped to the ground beside the birch. He sat there motionless for a

minute with his hands over his eyes. Then he looked up at the west. The entire horizon was shrouded in a dark purplish haze through which flashes of light were streaking; over the dismal autumn fields the storm of leaves raged unceasingly.

"Why did they come here?" Andrei asked with anguish in his voice. "Why?"

Yurgin made no reply, knowing that Andrei did not expect one. He picked up the coat roll from the ground. Then, without turning to look east, where a dark fir wood stood, Andrei confided:

"On the other side of that wood is Olkhovka."

"Your village?" Yurgin asked, surprised.

"Yes...."

Andrei sat motionless by the birch a minute more, his hands over his eyes....

II

The battalion marched a long time through the dense wood. Within the wood there was the oppressive smell of dampness and of still air. By the sides of the swampy road mossy firs tossed their nets of needles high into the sky. Under the firs, bowing feebly, stood scraggly rusty alders that had never seen the sun. In the drowsy glades and openings lay stagnant swamps with smelly reddish water.

Late in the afternoon the battalion emerged from the wood, and the men saw a spacious elevation with a sizable village standing on it. This was Olkhovka. All over the village grew tall, leafy birches; their satiny bark emitted a soft, radiant glow that suffused the entire hilltop. The men quickened their steps. As soon as they climbed the slope many of them dropped down to rest beside the wattle fences of the outlying cottages. A large group, canteens in hand, clustered around a well at the edge of the village.

Andrei also headed for the well. His face was coated with dust, and reflections of the flashes streaking across the dark western sky seemed to be flickering in his eyes. Matvei Yurgin filled Andrei's canteen for him out of turn. Andrei took a few noisy swallows, then lowered the canteen and looked at the village. The Olkhovka water had revived him. He felt steadier on his feet than he had the whole day. And now that he was in Olkhovka the thoughts which had been tormenting him on the way became superfluous and vanished of their own accord. He must content himself with the little that life begrudgingly granted; not on everyone did she bestow even this.

Matvei Yurgin leaned against a fence as he screwed on the cap of his canteen. "You have good water here," he remarked appreciatively with his habitual restraint.

"I'd know it anywhere," Andrei answered. "That drink just now made me remember everything. . . . I don't know what's happened to me: I feel refreshed, and on fire inside at the same time."

"Don't," Yurgin said glumly. "Take care of your heart."

"Let it burn," Andrei rejoined meditatively.

Yurgin hooked his canteen to his belt. "There's the battalion commander. Ask him to let you step in home," he advised Andrei. "Only see you don't stay long."

Andrei sprang away from the fence. "Where is he?"

Several horsemen had ridden up from the village. Ahead on a sweating bay, his trench coat flung open, rode Senior Lieutenant Loznevoi, the battalion commander. The lieutenant had come to the battalion a short while before, after the death of the old commander. He had a lean, narrow face with a thin hooked nose; in the shadow of the long visor of his crimson-edged cap a pair of wary grey eyes shone with a cold steely glitter. His features were frozen into a disgruntled expression which rarely changed; and when he did smile it was a crooked smile, with the left side of his face only.

Andrei was afraid of the new battalion commander. But now, oblivious of everything, he strode up to him with unusual determination. Rein-